

The Debate on the July 2013 Military Coup in Egypt: It Is About Much More than the Definition of a Coup (Part II)

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In the second part of the debate on the July 3, 2013 military coup, an attempt will be made to contextualize the international narrative developed by the United States (US) and the European Union (EU) as major actors who had interests in Egypt before and after the January 25, 2011 revolution and how it intersected with the Islamist narrative. It emerged out of complex attempts to represent these actors as supporters of the democratic transition. In the new open political system of 2011-2013, funding civil society institutions and pressure on the military to abide by the political road map to deliver a democratic stable government with which the US could deal were part of an overall strategy to regain grounds lost as a result of US association of the old regime repudiated by the January 25th revolution.

Democracy promotion emerged as a tool in the service of that new realpolitik casting doubt on the claim that the US and to a lesser extent the EU were impartial brokers. Two crises demonstrated the difficulties they faced in persuading the Egyptian public of their sincerity: (1) the way some of their non-governmental organizations (NGOs) did not follow the Egyptian law regulating the funding of the institutions of civil society and (2) their use of the new political system to establish contacts with the major political actors especially the new Mursi government as the representative of the new Islamist power elite.

The international narrative that American and European diplomats eventually developed to address these interests converged with the Islamist one in its depoliticized formulation of what democracy should mean to the major political actors e.g. the right of the democratically elected president to finish his term in office despite widespread dissatisfaction with his government and its mixed performance. Mursi's political opponents were counseled to wait until the next elections to vote him out of office. While this narrative initially condemned the coup, it was followed by tortured reversals reflecting an acceptance of the military led interim government as part of another realpolitik that demonstrated how democracy promotion offered complex articulations of the intersection of power and knowledge in the definitions of democratic governance as a global foreign policy tool.

A. Democracy Promotion and Civil Society Funding in Democratic Transitions:

The US and the EU were major international allies of former President Hosni Mubarak's 30 year rule relying on him to provide national and regional stability showing limited interest in democratic governance. The classified messages of Margaret Scoby, the ambassador to Egypt during his final years, released by Wikileaks' in 2010 specifically confirmed US knowledge of and willingness to accept widespread police brutality, human rights violations and Mubarak's personal opposition to any form of democracy promotion in exchange for his success in maintaining peace with Israel and stemming post 2003 regional instability.¹ The January 25th 2011 protest movement challenged this political arithmetic leading to a scramble within the US foreign policy establishment for a new political cover that provided new bases of legitimacy in the new Egypt. In the many visits by US diplomats throughout 2011, there appeared to be a difficult search for a coherent discourse on a new role for the US to play in the transition. The earliest articulation of this was made by visiting ambassador William Burns in February 2011, who stated that "the US admires what Egyptians have already achieved... We know also that it's a transition that can only be navigated by Egyptians themselves...The United States will do everything that we can to help in a long term partnership with Egypt that is partly about relations between government, but also relations between our two societies."²

By May-June of 2011 when a major crisis between Egypt and the US began over the latter's funding of civil society institutions, it had become clear that democracy promotion was the new vehicle whereby the US and the EU as representatives of older democracies could deepen their influence over the outcome of the political transition. The discourse they offered in support of this new project was new: it claimed that the US's greater involvement with the institutions of civil society and indeed democracy promotion itself were technical, not political activities and should be valued for capacity building, not as means of deeper spread of US influence.

Departing Ambassador Scoby offered a surprising formulation of this view by giving a positive spin to the fact that "her country did not play a role in the January 25 revolution." She used it to negate the charge that her government was continuing to meddle in Egyptian internal affairs through relations with civil society institutions; she

¹ "US Embassy Cables: Mubarak: Egypt's President-for-Life", *The Guardian* (December 9, 2010); "Steering Egypt Into the 21st Century", *Newsweek Magazine* (December 21, 2010); Mark Landler and Andrew Lehren, "Cables Show Delicate U.S. Dealings with Egypt's Leaders", *The New York Times* (January 27, 2011).

² Embassy of the United States, "US Ambassador William Burns to Egyptian Press" (February 22, 2011).

said that “the US does not take sides. We only provide technical assistance to establish democracy” adding that it would be up to Egyptians to choose the most suitable form of democracy. “We have trained Egyptians and familiarized them with the principles of democracy. And we have encouraged them to attain their freedom”.³

These claims about US democracy promotion as a technical and not a political endeavor whereby the trainers did not influence the way the trainees then defined what was suitable for them have since become the mantra of most US officials visiting Egypt. They explained why and how their government should be considered as a supporter of the democratic transition even when democracy promotion was part of a policy package generally identified with influence peddling like one billion dollars of debt relief, one billion dollars of loan guarantees and the establishment of an enterprise fund in support of the new US-Egyptian partnership. Ambassador Burns still maintained that “it’s not the business of the United States to impose or to dictate conditions with these kinds of opportunities... we’re going to find mutually acceptable ways of providing the kinds of assistance that fully respect Egypt’s sovereignty”.⁴

Assistant Secretary Jeffrey Feltman for Near East Affairs, who visited Egypt on August 14, 2011, denied that there was any conflict of interest between Egypt and the US in this matter. “What happened in January is that the Egyptian people went out to call for basic right and to demand more respect from their rulers. The revolution was not against the US or related to it from our point of view....the U.S. has a long history of supporting Egyptian civil society in responding to the challenges that face the Egyptian people. There is nothing unique about our work in the field of Egyptian civil society. There are international parties as EU countries working in the field of civil society in Egypt and there are a lot of Egyptian civil society organizations that have professional experience that is critically important in achieving the objectives of the vision of a democratic society...The US does not aim to select winners out of the contestants and we do not offer funding to political parties, but what we offer is training and capacity building....It is the Egyptians who will decide the future of their country and will go to the polls to choose the best people to represent them in the political process. So, the United States does not-by any means-want to interfere in the current process, but we look forward to seeing a free, fair and credible process”.⁵

In many ways, the US’s discussion of its engagement of civil society institutions and/or non-governmental organizations echoed a dominant acceptance by students of

³ Gomaa Hamadalla, “US Ambassador: America Didn’t Play a role in Egypt’s Revolution”, *Al-Masry al-Youm* (June 27, 2011).

⁴ Embassy of the United States, “Remarks and Q&A by Ambassador William J. Burns (June 29, 2011).

⁵ Embassy of the United States, “Interview: Assistant Secretary Feltman” published in the Egyptian government newspaper *Al-Ahram* (August 14, 2011).

international relations of major powers' reliance on NGOs for the implementation of their aid packages and democratizing initiatives. For most part, this has been seen as a benign activity that acquired positive connotations because it was associated with the desirable empowerment and integration of non-state actors in the international system. There were very few critics of this particular construction of the role of NGOs and/or civil society in the foreign policy agendas of major powers. The representatives of the US government, who dealt with the concerns of the Egyptian government regarding interference, relied heavily on these scholarly formulations of this accepted international practice.

Recently though, some have suggested the need for a critical view of how NGOs were emerging as part of a more hybrid international system upon whom supranational actors relied to set the stage for other forms of intervention.¹ Along with the spread of monetary mechanisms and new forms of communication, NGOs and civil society institutions set the moral bases of political legitimacy and as such represent international "intervention [that] has been internalized and universalized.... The NGOs demonstration of the new order as a peaceful biopolitical context seems to have blinded these theorists to the brutal effects that moral intervention produces as a prefiguration of world order"² and power relations.

In Egypt, this international narrative on democracy promotion was complicated by the fact that the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), the political manager of the first year of the transition and the largest recipient of US aid (\$1.3 billion), emerged as the source of protest against "US interference". General Mohamed Al-Assar raised this issue at the US Institute of Peace during a visit to Washington stating that "we want help, not interference."⁶ In response, the US used the role of the military in the transition as a means of underlining the good effects of its aid and/or funding. The military's refusal to crush the protest movement that deposed the former president cast them in a favorable light in what some has characterized later on as potential "democratic managers" of the Arab spring transitions.³ Some argued that it was possible for major powers (including the US as the single superpower dominating the international system) to encourage the military's "socialization through imitation" or "socialization through punishment/coercion" through the copying of civil-military relations in older democracies as a rational choice and a way to become winners in the democratic transitions.⁴

If these arguments made political sense, why was SCAF protesting US interference in Egyptian affairs? With human rights organizations emerging as vocal critics over

⁶ Embassy of the United States, "Interview: Assistant Secretary Feltman", published in the Egyptian government newspaper, *al-Ahram* (August 14, 2011).

SCAF's handling of virginity checks of women demonstrators and the large scale arrest and trials of civilian protesters at military courts, the SCAF led government used the failure of US contractors (the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute) to get proper licenses⁷ and the illegal transfer of funds by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation to damn democracy promotion as threats to national sovereignty presenting itself as its defender.⁸ Here, SCAF posed as a serious "democratic manager" faulting the US and the EU for disrespecting Egyptian laws while making sure that civil society institutions remained under strict state control.⁹

Secretary of state Hilary Clinton was reluctant to criticize SCAF's actions choosing instead to boldly praise them on September 28, 2011, "I would like to recognize the work of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, which has been the institution of stability and continuity. The Egyptian people look to the Supreme Council to support the transition and to ensure that the elections go in a very positive way that provides transparency, freedom and fairness."¹⁰

Here, the US was keen to manage short term conflicts of interests between the US and SCAF to ensure the long term goal of delivering a stable Egypt. Democracy promotion emerged as another diplomatic instrument to deliver a transition and an institutional outcome that were hospitable to US interests and influence.

Finally, when the Egyptian government arrested many US, German and Egyptian nationals associated with its international funders and NGOs in December 2011, the US and Germany worked out arrangements with the SCAF led government that allowed their nationals to be spirited away out of the country so that they would not remain under arrest, like the Egyptian nationals who worked for them, and eventually face serious legal charges and penalties. As such, democracy promotion emerged as a strictly national affair in which the goals, policies and interests of the major powers and their nationals were separate from the local nationals engaged in this project. Democracy promotion remained a strictly national not a global project.

⁷ Mohamed Abdel Baky, "Reiterating the Differences", *Al-Ahram Weekly* (18- 24 August, 2011).

⁸ Gregg Benzow, "Egypt Defends NGO Raids", *Deutsche Welle*; <http://www.dw.de/egypt-defends-ngo-raids/a-15640248>.

⁹ Stephen McInerney, "SCAF's Assault on Egypt's Civil Society", *Foreign Policy Magazine* (September 28, 2011); Human Rights Watch, "Egypt: Government Moves to Restrict Rights and Democracy Groups", *Human Rights Watch* (2011).

¹⁰ Embassy of the United States, "Briefing by Secretary Clinton, Egyptian Foreign Minister", US Department of State, September 28, 2011.

B. Realpolitik in a Global World and the Art of Defending a Democratically Elected President and Working with the Military one that Replaced Him

The international narrative on the coup of July 3, 2013 was shaped by two women who were the official representatives of the two major international players with important interests in Egypt. Ann Patterson was American ambassador to Egypt from June 2011 to the summer of 2013. Catherine Ashton was the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy during this same period. Both developed close working relationships with president Mursi, his government and the Muslim Brotherhood. They raised concerns about some of his authoritarian constitutional declaration that gave him powers that put him above all other political institutions in November 2012.¹¹ They were equally critical of the restrictive draft of a new Egyptian NGO law that his government was about to pass in the summer of 2013 which added more restrictions on the functions of these institutions.¹² Finally, they also opposed the planned acts of civil disobedience planned for June 30 against president Mursi¹³ defending his right to finish his term of office.

While Patterson incurred the wrath of all important political groups in Egypt ending her tenure in a cloud of general condemnation, Ashton did not inspire similar negative reactions. As US Ambassador to Egypt, Patterson's daily activities seemed to be a constant reminder of the power of the US and what some saw as its constant meddling with and undermining of the transition. In contrast, Ashton's periodic visits, which raised the same concerns and articulated very similar views, provoked less objection. This reflected the utility of representing the EU as a supranational entity whose interests cannot be identified with a national government with a long history and a definite set of national interests. Ashton also benefited from the EU's self definition as a "civilian power" which was guided by normative concerns that distinguished it from other major powers especially the US.⁵ It demonstrated an interesting use of representation in the service of global order which some have identified as "governance without government."⁶ The UN, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund represented earlier international articulations of this particular mode of operation that has been reshaped by globalization. It has allowed the EU to pursue the same tactics and goals that guided the US in the Egyptian transition, but without the burden of the old representations of crude self interests and the historical forms associated with it.⁷

¹¹ Embassy of the United States, "Press Release: the United States' Reaction to Egypt's November 22 Decisions", November 23, 2012.

¹² For US and EU views of the law, see Joel Gulhand, "Ministry Responds to US Criticism of NGO Law", *Daily News Egypt* (June 3, 2013).

¹³ Noran El-Behairy, "Ashton Worried About Violent Protests", *Daily News Egypt* (June 19, 2013); Embassy of the United State, "Ambassador Anne W. Patterson 's Speech at the Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies", (June 18, 2013).

Differences in approach and representations aside, what can one say about the realpolitik that led to the convergences of the US and the EU agendas in Egypt and the international narrative they produced on the coup of July 3, 2013? As seasoned diplomats, Ashton and Patterson were agreed that American and European interests required the return to stability. Given that the new democratically elected president Muhammad Mursi (and his group the Muslim Brotherhood) had a local base that won 5 referenda and elections in this 3 year transition, this earned him the democratic right to govern at least until the end of his four year term. This view was about both about the nature of democratic governance and Islamist success in addressing western interests.

Mursi's role in negotiating a cease fire in a deadly round of fighting between Hamas and Israel that began with the Israeli assassination of Ahmed al-Ga'bary, the military commander of the Al-Qassam Brigade escalated into a two week exchange of deadly fire. This Israeli military offensive was accompanied with a separate threat of the re-occupation of the West Bank and the dismantling of the Palestinian Authority should it continue with the effort to upgrade its observer status at the United Nations.¹⁴ Mursi's successful negotiation of a cease fire between Hamas and Israel in November of 2012 improved his standing in European and US policy circles worried about how a new Islamist government in Cairo would deal with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and relations between Egypt and Israel.

Unfortunately, Mursi used his newly strengthened position to issue the constitutional declaration already mentioned alarming all other Egyptian political actors of a planned return to authoritarianism. While the US and the EU expressed concern at his action, they reasoned it was more important to work with his government which could meet their long term interests rather than pay attention to the increased disillusionment of what they considered to be small, but noisy actors. Like Mursi, they misjudged the level of popular frustration that delivered another massive wave of street protest that created an opening for a new alliance among his political opponents, the representative of the old regime and the military.

Two definitions of democracy emerged before the outbreak of mass protests on June 30 that were associated with powerful actors interested in different sets of power relations, Both Patterson and Aston cast negative aspersions on street protests. Patterson declared that she and the US government were "deeply skeptical of its results... Democracy was a means, not an end".¹⁵ Ashton agreed suggesting the need for movement towards "deeper democracy" worrying about the "likelihood of violence" and

¹⁴ Mohammed al-Bahairy, "Israel Taghtal Qa'id al-Qassam fi Ghara ala Gaza", *Al-Masry al-Youm* (November 15, 2012), p. 9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

effects on the economy".¹⁶ These anti populist sentiments dismissed local definitions of democratic expression and practice as key to the rights that the revolution had delivered stressing the stability required for the building of institutions that could meet local and international needs. As representatives of older democracies, the US and the EU relied on this position to exert pressure in favor of setting new standards for democratic practice that devalued local definitions and concerns during a period of heightened lack of trust among the major parties. The Egyptian public opted for the tried and tested weapon of mass protest that the military hijacked to issue an ultimatum to the president to call for immediate early elections which the president turned down.

When the military deposed Egypt's first democratically elected president on July 3, 2013, the disconnect between the national and international narratives on the coup and the power relations that they represented was stark. The dominant national narrative saw it as a triumph of the popular will and the international narrative saw it as a step back for democratic politics. For both the US and the EU, it signaled the collapse of the realpolitik that they thought they had negotiated with a new Islamist partner in Egypt and the need for a new one with the military led government. For the US, this created legal problems regarding the dispensing of aid to a country that had just witnessed a military coup. Despite the initial condemnation of the deposition of president Mursi, the representatives of the US stopped short of calling what happened on July 3, 2013 as a coup. Eventually, it was characterized it as popular action that was backed by the military allowing some dispensing of aid and to deal with the military led government including General al-Sisi, the leader of the coup.

Conclusion

Immediately following the coup of July 3, 2013, the coverage of the event seemed to be focused on which of the competing national and international narratives was better at explaining what had happened. Next, the debate devolved into a determination of which one offered a better definition of democracy and the democratic transition in Egypt. This turn, which led some to argue that the international narrative was better at offering a better understanding of what happened than the local misguided, one indicated that this debate was also about power: whose constructions mattered or carried weight and whose interests were served by the old and new social orders. Those, who reduced the discussion of the coup to another instance in which Egyptians/Arabs/Muslims knew least what they were doing or what was good for them in steering their democratic transition produced familiar orientalist articulations. They showed woeful lack of appreciation of the complex struggles among the local actors

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

and those between them and the international ones that showed the effort to undermine an old order and inch closer to setting the stage for a new one.

The minimal consensus that allowed the January 25th, 2011 protests to get rid of Hosni Mubarak gathering around the demands for bread, liberty, social justice and human dignity, has been fractured by major social and political divisions among key actors about means and ends. US and EU funding of the institutions of civil society have created new sources of division about the role of these institutions and their connections to international actors. In seeking to spread their influence in the new political system, the US and the EU have also contributed to mistrust about their intentions among the key political actors. It is one of the hallmarks of the authoritarian legacy that survives along with the definition of politics as zero sum game, the polarizing views of one another and corruption of major institutions of society. These are some of the major challenges facing Egyptians who are engaged in this transition and our understanding of these issues is not helped by positing all knowing international actors, who have in the past and continue at present to contribute to these problems, as better judges of how to navigate it.

Key Words

President Muhammad Mursi, Non-governmental Organizations, the US, the EU, Ann Patterson, Catherine Ashton.

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¹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 34-38.

² *Ibid.*, p. 37.

³ Birthe Hansen and Carsten Jensen, "Military Roles in the Greater Middle East", in *Democracy Managers*, ed. Carsten Jensen (Copenhagen: Royal Danish Defense College, 2013), pp. 10-15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

⁵ Martin Beck, "The Comeback of the EU as a "Civilian Power" through the Arab Spring?" *Giga Focus* (number 2, 2013), www.giga-hamburg.de/giga-focus.

⁶ Hardt and Negri, pp. 13-14.